Thanks to grants and much hard work, OSF’s collection of film and sound spanning its entire history is now being preserved and made accessible.

By Gwyn Hervochon

The hours between matinee and evening performances are typically quiet in the Angus Bowmer Theatre, but on a Friday evening in July, the lobby was a hub of activity: OSF archivists were hosting a celebration for the recent $200,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for a three-year project to digitize and create access to the audiovisual collection in OSF’s archives.

In the center of the festivities, an older gentleman—recently turned 90—was holding court from his chair. As guest of honor, longtime OSF Company member Carl Ritchie was surrounded by a crowd of friends and admirers, who broke into laughter at his stories and witty one-liners.

A 60–year dream

As the fortunate archivist who has worked extensively with OSF’s audiovisual collection and Carl Ritchie’s contribution to it, I felt we had finally realized a dream that had been more than 60 years in the making. Carl was cast in the 1950 season by OSF founder Angus Bowmer himself, and throughout the following decades, both Carl’s work with the Festival and the development of the OSF Archives steadily laid the groundwork for the incredible project now made possible by the NEH.

Organizing the tapes

“What has been done here in the past is, obviously, the reason we are here now. And there are clues, hints, examples, reminders, and many, many gems of discovery and reawakening to be found in this treasure trove of what [NBC Radio producer] Andy Love liked to call our wonderful warehouse of ‘Many Brave Noises.’ ” —Carl Ritchie, on the OSF audio collection, 1999

Ritchie wrote the above words as part of his 1996–1999 Audio Archive Project in which he inventoried OSF’s audio collection—nearly 2,000 reel-to-reel and cassette tapes, organized only by year and play title, that dated from 1950 through the 1990s. By the time he began the project, his career with the Festival stretched back nearly 50 years, with credits as an actor, director, playwright and the Festival’s first year-round publicity director, from 1957 to 1967.

In that capacity, Carl scripted and voiced hundreds of promotional spots for radio and television, designed innovative promotional materials and strategically marketed the Festival through a significant period of growth. He worked with acclaimed NBC Radio producer Andrew C. Love on 30-minute play adaptations of OSF productions that were recorded live on the Elizabethan Stage and broadcast nationally between 1951 and 1974. The Archives also contains several radio documentaries written and produced by Ritchie, including his 1973 Peabody Award-winning series, Will Shakespeare and Certain of His Friends.

Because of his long association with the Festival and his direct role in many of the recordings, Ritchie was aware when he began the project that OSF’s audio collection documented a wide range of organizational achievements. Yet at the time, the main
obstacle to enjoying and making use of this wealth of information was the inability to locate a particular recording among the hundreds of inadequately identified tapes. And even if found, would a recording be playable after 30 or more years?

Thanks to Carl’s project, the OSF Archives now has a well-organized audio collection offering a connection to OSF’s past that may have otherwise been lost. Carl listened to each recording, identified its contents, and created an innovative categorization scheme. Simultaneously, he wrote a detailed review—on his electric typewriter—for every recording. The result was six three-ring binders totaling more than 900 pages, complete with descriptive technical notes, personal anecdotes and historical context. This catalog is an entertaining read both as a companion resource to the audio collection and as a history of the Festival.

Throughout the catalog, Carl repeatedly comments on the value of OSF’s audio collection and the importance of the recordings being heard and actively used. However, soon after the completion of his project, Kit Leary, who was OSF’s sole archivist from 1986 to 2010, restricted every reel-to-reel tape he inventoried because of their fragility. Without funding to transfer the tapes to a modern and accessible format, the tapes have languished on the Archives’ shelves for more than a decade.

A 2007 comprehensive review of the OSF Archives by an outside consultant helped spark the effort to digitize the tapes. The report advised taking immediate steps to identify funding for the preservation of these valuable assets. Senior staff at OSF responded to the evaluation in its 2009 Long Range Plan, committing to “modernize our Archives as an open resource for the 21st century.” As a first step, the organization applied for and received a two-year grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission to improve overall accessibility to the Archives’ resources. Thanks to grant funding and organizational support, the Archives is now staffed by three full-time professional archivists.

Saving the sounds
Building on this momentum, the archivists began assembling materials in 2012 for a Preservation and Access grant to the NEH. We proposed to digitize and make widely accessible a significant portion of OSF’s audiovisual collection that remained inaccessible due to fragility or outdated format: hundreds of 16-millimeter film reels, audio reels and a variety of misfit technologies such as Beta, Hi-8, Mini DV and 1-inch Type B video tape. We crafted a narrative detailing the value these recordings held for students and scholars of theatre and theatre history and for OSF’s widespread audiences. All the while, Carl’s catalog served as a guide, and his urgent calls for action to save many deteriorating tapes remained an ongoing inspiration.

Under the guidance of OSF’s grant-writing staff, our efforts were rewarded and we celebrated the news of our success this past April. The grant will fund the digitization of 2,655 items, including all recordings inventoried by Carl Ritchie. This selection contains the oldest recordings in the OSF Archives, including home movies Angus Bowmer made in the 1930s featuring original OSF Company members.

Although some recordings will be restricted to on-site use in the Archives because of copyright and union rules, approximately 65 percent of the materials in the NEH project will be available remotely. By the end of the three-year project, OSF researchers and audiences will be able to explore project results in a digital audiovisual archive, accessible through OSF’s website. This includes at least one performance of all plays in Shakespeare’s canon; most are represented at least twice. Users may enjoy audio recordings of full-length performances from 1950–1983, play adaptations for radio, promotional spots, interviews, music, significant events in the company’s history and more.

The project also includes the digitization of Carl’s enormous catalog. These notebooks are a portal into the audio collection; they provide context for the recordings and the circumstances surrounding their creation as only someone who was there could know. With the digitization of his typewritten entries in conjunction with the recordings themselves, Carl’s voice (just as vibrant with personality on the written page as his resonant radio voice) serves as a virtual tour-guide through both the collection and a significant portion of the Festival’s history. As the project progresses and beyond, we will continually build on the digital content available to users so that a variety of archival materials—photos, original script pages, souvenir programs, etc.—will enhance the experience of the recordings.

When the evening’s celebration drew to a close last July, after Executive Director Emeritus Paul Nicholson delivered a toast declaring Ritchie “one of the unsung heroes of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival,” the archivists treated Carl to dinner at Omar’s—an Ashland institution since 1946. There, he continued to entertain us with his memories of dining at Omar’s with Angus and Gertrude Bowmer and Richard Graham, one of OSF’s main leading men throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Graham played King Lear in the 1951, 1958 and 1964 productions—all of which will soon be available from any computer in the world. Stay tuned for these “brave noises” and more as the NEH project unfolds.

“Digitizing and Creating Access to the Audiovisual Collection in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival Archives is made possible by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this project do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.”

Gwyn Hervochon is OSF’s Digital Project Archivist.